

SERMON ACTS 2 PENTECOST – IS THE FIRE STILL BURNING?

May 31, 2020

Do you know whose birthday it is today? Unfortunately, there's no cake big enough to hold all the candles because it is over 2000 years old. Today we celebrate Pentecost, the birth of the Christian Church. While Pentecost is not celebrated as much as Easter and Christmas in the Christian calendar, it is still one of the most important days in the history of the Church. Originally it was a Jewish holiday that occurred fifty days after the Sabbath of the Passover. Historically it had two purposes: first, to celebrate the Lord giving Moses the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai; and secondly, to present the first fruits of the barley harvest to the Lord God. During Pentecost the streets of Jerusalem were often more crowded than at Passover with many God-fearing pilgrims coming from all over the known world at that time. It was a time of thanksgiving for the Jewish people.

But the Pentecost following the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the grave was the most memorable one of all; for it was the turning point in the history of the world and the beginning of the Church as we know it today. The Apostle Luke records this historical event in the second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, verses 1-21. Now I am not going to read verses 9-11 because there are some names in there that this old redneck highway engineer from Clemson cannot pronounce. Listen to how Luke describes the event.

Read Acts 2:1-8 and 12-21

The Holy Spirit came upon the disciples and the Christian Church was born. In the fourteenth chapter of Gospel of John, Jesus promised to send a Counselor to teach the disciples, to guide them and to show them the truth; here at Pentecost we have the fulfillment of this promise. From this moment on the Holy Spirit becomes a dominant reality not only in the life of the early church, but also in the church throughout history to the present time. It is important to note that the Spirit came not simply to visit, but to abide, to become the driving force behind the spread of Christianity.

On the Day of Pentecost, the disciples and all other followers were all together in one place. Suddenly the sound of a violent wind filled the room and they saw what appeared to be tongues of fire coming to rest on each of them. The coming of the Spirit is marked by the sound of the wind and the sight of fire. If you remember John the Baptist predicted in Luke 3:16 that Jesus would not baptize with water but with the Holy Spirit and with fire. All of the people in the room were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit enabled them.

Were they speaking in tongues or were they able to speak in the languages of all the different nationalities that had come to Jerusalem for the celebration of Pentecost? Who knows – what we do know is that for the first time in their lives this group of bystanders were hearing the

Word of God in a way that struck straight home to their hearts as never before and in a way that they could understand. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, the disciples were speaking in the universal language of God – love, and it touched the hearts of their listeners.

Now some of the crowd were amazed that these simple uneducated fishermen from Galilee were suddenly able to speak in so many different languages. However, as we all know there is always a critic or naysayer in every crowd; so some said that they were just drunk. However, Peter, the disciple who had denied knowing Jesus three times on the night that He was arrested, stood up and boldly told them that they couldn't be drunk, it was too early; it was only nine o'clock in the morning. Then Peter after explaining that this was the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy in the Old Testament went on to share the Good News of Jesus Christ with them.

There are many aspects of this particular text that we could discuss this morning, such as the tongues, the different languages that the disciples were suddenly able to speak, the inclusive nature of the gospel, and Peter's sermon where 3,000 people joined the church; however, I want to focus on the fire – the fire that came upon the church at Pentecost.

Now we are all familiar with fire, both its good and bad qualities. Fire is an important part of our domestic life – used for cooking our meals and heating our homes. There is nothing like sitting in front of a warm fire on a cold winter night or a meal cooked over an open campfire.

But fire can also be destructive, destroying homes, businesses and forests, as we have all seen here in New Mexico many times, especially during a dry period like now. Unfortunately, I have fought my share of forest fires while growing up in South Carolina where timber is a major industry. I also fought one house fire when I was a teenager. In our small country town we had a volunteer fire department and a fire truck that didn't work half the time. One day we responded to a fire on the main road through town. My brothers and I got the hoses and went to the fire and started putting water on the blaze. I went around back of the house to see how far and how fast the fire was spreading. The fire was beginning to consume the back porch. I saw this bucket that I thought was full of water, so I threw it on the fire hoping to extinguish it. Unfortunately, it was gasoline and that porch went up like a Roman candle. Needless to say, I wasn't named the fireman of the month!

In the Bible, fire is associated with the divine presence of God, purification, and judgment. You remember that God first appeared to Moses in a burning bush, that the Israelites were led out of Egypt and across the wilderness by a pillar of fire at night, and that God appeared on Mount Sinai in the fire. Fire in these cases was a symbol of holiness. Jesus often referred to fire when discussing the final judgment.

At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was represented by tongues of fire coming to rest on each person present. And once the Spirit came upon the Church, it has never been the same since. However, we, and I'm talking about the church both locally and universal, have at times forgotten about the Holy Spirit or put it on a shelf only to bring it out on special occasions such as Pentecost Sunday. Look around at the church today, do you see fire in it – I mean do you see it alive with the Spirit, doing what Jesus commanded it to do in the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-20 – “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”

Two men were talking as they watched a church being destroyed by fire. The first man said to the other man: “This is the first time I ever seen you at church.” To which the second man replied: “Well, this is the first time that I have ever seen the church on fire.”

Of course, we are living in interesting and challenging times and trying to serve the Lord within the current restrictions due to the coronavirus is difficult. However, the fact remains that only a few churches here and there are showing some life; most are just going through the motions. Now let me state right up front that I am not talking about High Desert, but the Church overall – all churches and all denominations. Because overall the Church has lost its fire; if anything, it's a small flame like a pilot light instead of the blazing glory that it was created to be. We have lost the power of the Spirit in the early church.

Listen to what happened after Peter led by the Spirit shared the Good News at Pentecost: “Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about 3,000 were added to their numbers.” In other words, 3,000 people accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior and joined the church at one time as a result of Peter being led by the Spirit; now that's more than twice as many people who joined the entire New Mexico Annual Conference of the Methodist Church during all of last year. In Peter's time people were knocking down the door to get into church. Why isn't this happening today; are we really using the power of the Spirit as Christ intended?

This reminds me of a story of a city dweller who moved to a farm and bought a milk cow. A short time later the cow went dry. So he discussed this with a nearby farmer. The city slicker said that he was confused as to why this happened. “I can't understand it,” he said, “If ever a person was considerate of an animal, I was of that cow. If I didn't need any milk, I didn't milk her. If I only needed a quart, I only took a quart.” Now with the facts, the farmer tried to explain to the city slicker that the only way to keep the milk flowing is to not take as little as possible from the cow, but to take as much as possible. In the same way, the Church may have gone dry because it has not taken full advantage of the power of the Holy Spirit.

Now I enjoy reading the stories of the early church as found in Acts of the Apostles and the letters of the Apostle Paul. And during my studies at Perkins Seminary, I took several classes on the history of the Methodist Church. Based on these studies, I have come to the conclusion that we have lost the fire, passion, and determination of the early church. I have become convinced that we have drifted from our roots as Methodists. And what are these roots? Well, they are not much different from those of the early church. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church, stressed the old religion, the religion of the Bible, the religion of the Church born at Pentecost. The hallmark of the church is the Christian life – one of faith and love put into practice. Emphasis is placed on personal spiritual growth, sharing one’s faith, and service to our neighbors. We are called to witness and serve the world around us.

The early church used a threefold approach – a personal relationship with the Lord, evangelism and service. As we discussed two weeks ago, the strength of any local church is directly related to the spiritual well-being of those who worship there. Just because we have accepted Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior does not mean that we are perfect and can sit back and relax. We are each called to grow spiritually each and every day on a steady diet of solid food – God’s Word. God’s has a plan and purpose for each of us. Ours is a journey, striving to live each day the best we can and trying to become more Christ-like each and every day.

Now the word evangelism turns some people and churches off. Many churches operate under the “Field of Dreams” philosophy – you know, open the doors on Sunday morning and they will come. And hopefully, the doors of our church will be open next Sunday. But Jesus made it very clear in the Great Commission that as His followers we are to go and make disciples of all nations, all people, including those who live in our community and next door to us. He said go, not sit back and wait. We are called to share our faith through our words and how we live our daily lives. This is one area where the church and we as its members have lost the fire and the approach of the early church. A Lutheran pastor once asked me why the Methodist Church was not growing. My answer was simple, we have gotten lazy! We sit in our offices waiting for people to come to us.

Well, it doesn’t work that way. Jesus set the example by going out among the people; where they worked, lived and played. The disciples followed His example and Christianity spread all over the world. Wesley recognized this principle and said that the world was his parish. And he expected that we would follow this same approach that the Lord Himself had given us. But, you know what, we have gotten complacent, going out among the people just doesn’t fit our busy personal schedules; it takes us away from our computers and smartphone; and let’s be honest, we just are not comfortable doing it; so we tend to say let’s just see who comes through the door; that’s good enough; let’s just do enough to get by and not utilize all or any of the power of the Spirit. But if we are going to rekindle the fire and become the people that Jesus expects

us to be, we must heed His command and go where the Spirit leads us in our families, neighborhood, and community; we must invite our friends and neighbors to join us in worship.

The Church is also called to care for those in need. In His parable on the sheep and goats in Matthew 25, Jesus tells us to feed the hungry, provide a cup of cool water to those who are thirsty, welcome strangers, provide clothing for those in need, care for the sick, and visit those in prison. If you look at the history of the early church as recorded in Acts, you will see that they focused on caring for each other, sharing their possessions and healing the sick.

Now this is one area where High Desert is doing a great job with your continued support and active involvement in the Pantry, Feed New Mexico Kids, the Community of Hope, MorningStar ministry, music ministry to nursing homes, feeding homeless in International Zone, and other outreach ministries. But we can't rest on our laurels and past accomplishments. I feel that God is calling us to reach out in more areas. The outreach of any church springs from the working of the Holy Spirit. And I feel that the Spirit is calling us to even more activities and outreach efforts as we get out of our homes and return to worship.

Now I don't mean to sound negative or to criticize, but I truly believe that we need to recapture the Spirit and fire of the early church at Pentecost. There's power in the Spirit and nothing is impossible when it is done in the name of Jesus Christ. The church limits the power of Jesus and the Spirit when it says they cannot do something. As Christians we are called to share the Good News, to help each other grow spiritually, and to love and care for our neighbors. Let us pray that we as individuals and a church will follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit; ask Him where He is leading us to witness, where He wants us to serve; and what new ministries He wants us to start. Pray that God will rekindle the fire of the Spirit within us and fan the flame that is already burning here. Wouldn't it be great if the word got around Rio Rancho that the Methodists were drunk, drunk with the Spirit? Let's keep the fire burning and let's set Rio Rancho on fire for the Lord! Amen